M. THOMAS INGE

SAM WATKINS AND THE FICTIONALITY OF FACT

The name Samuel Rush Watkins is not one you will find entered in the major encyclopedias of the South or the Civil War, nor will you find in indexed in most of the extensive historical chronicles of that event in American history. He was a bit forgetful when it came to names and dates in his one published book, which historian Bell Irvin Wiley said had

> a number of limitations and deficiencies. The fact of his working solely from memory caused him to make some errors of detail ... His prejudices sometimes led to distortions ... Watkins sometimes reports as direct quotations long excerpts from prayers and speeches which he admittedly did not write down at the time and he could not have remembered after twenty years. Some of the instances which he relates have the flavor of tall tales....[1]

Also Roy P. Basler has taken note of Watkins's "minor inaccuracies in the recording of names and recollections of precise dates..."[2] Yet when

---

[1] Bell Irvin Wiley, "Introduction," "Co. Aytch." *Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment; or, A Side Show of the Big Show* (Jackson, Tenn.: McCowat—Mercer Press, 1952) 11—23 (quotations on pp. 17, 19).

[2] Roy P. Basler, "Introduction," "Co. Aytch": *A Side Show of the Big Show* (New York: Collier,1962) 5—9 (quotation on p. 9).

writers want local color and memorable first-hand comments by a literate witness, they turn to Watkins. Every segment of the recent PBS television series by Ken Burns, *The Civil War* (1990), included quotations from Watkins's comments and observations (the published text by Geoffrey C. Ward includes over twenty), and the multi-volume Time-Life series, *The Civil War*, quoted from him over a dozen times.[3]

It is, indeed, not the history but the quotability and engaging personality of Sam Watkins that has kept his book in print since it first appeared down to today under the title of "*Co. Aytch,*" *Maury Crays, First Tennessee Regiment; or, A Side Show of the Big Show.* First published serially in his hometown newspaper, the *Columbia Herald,* beginning May 13, 1881, and continuing through 1882, the columns were promptly collected and issued by the Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House of Nashville in an edition of 2,000 in both hardcover and paper covers. The reputation of the book was so strong after the first edition was exhausted that in 1900 another edition of 2,000 copies was issued by the *Chattanooga Times* newspaper with a few minor changes. The demand for copies of "Co. *Aytch"* among collectors during the next half decade led to the publication of a facsimile reprint of the 1900 edition by the McCowatt-Mercer Press of Jackson, Tennessee, in 1952 with an introduction by Bell Irvin Wiley, an index, and illustrations drawn from photographic archives. A popular paperback edition appeared in 1962 in the Collier Books Civil War Classics series with an introduction by Roy P. Basler, and in 1982 a facsimile reprint of the first edition was issued by the Press of Morningside Bookshop in Dayton, Ohio, with an introduction by Lee A. Wallace, Jr., an index, and further contemporary photographs.[4]

---

[3] See Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf, 1990), and *The Civil War*, 28 vols. (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books. 1987).

[4] *"Co. Aytch," Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment; or, A Side Show of the Big Show,* with an introduction by Lee A. Wallace, Jr. (Dayton, Ohio: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1982).

Sam Watkins's *"Co. Aytch"* is a personal memoir of his experiences in the Civil War which has been acclaimed by his admirers as a lively and witty commentary on the war and its significance from the unusual point of view of an ordinary southern foot solder. Watkins had a way with words, and he invested his memoirs with a high degree of literary artistry and narrative skill. His uses of irony, humor, metaphor, imagery, fable, and description compare favorably with such authors as Stephen Crane, Ambrose Bierce, and others who created works of fiction about the Civil War. An examination of the literay qualities of *"Co. Aytch"* raises issues about the fictionality of fact and the factuality of fiction. Can one write a primary historical document that has the characteristics of fiction, and what does that tell us about the nature of literary art and its relation to reality?

The details of the life and career of Sam Watkins suggest little about his acquaintance with literature or the sources of his inspiration as a writer. He was born June 26, 1839, near Columbia, Tennessee, on a farm owned by his father, who came originally from North Carolina. Aside from working his father's land, we only know that in his youth he clerked at the general store owned by S. F. and J. M. Mayes in Columbia,[5] suggesting some rudimentary instruction in mathematics, but we know nothing definite of his early education. He did attend, however, Jackson College in Columbia, which burned in 1862 and did not reopen after the war. No doubt here he studied the classics, theology, rhetoric, and the standard fare at such schools for young men of the time (a quotation from Vergil's *Aeneid*, 2.5—6. appears on the title page of *"Co. Aytch"* which suggests some acquaintance with classical literature and translated means: "which most wretched things I myself saw and was a great part of them").

At the age of twenty-one, in the spring of 1861, when it appeared that Tennessee was about to secede and war was certain, Sam Watkins

---

[5] See Sam R. Watkins, *"Co. Aytch," Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment; or, a Side Show of the Big Show,* hereafter abbreviated as W (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Publishing House, 1882) 146. All quotations in the text are from this edition.

joined his neighborhood friends and enlisted first in the Bigby Grays on April 26 and later the Maury Grays on May 15, then being organized as Company H of the First Regiment Tennessee Volunteers. When word came that Virginia had been invaded, the First Tennessee voted to join their forces. Thus Sam first saw action in September with the Army of Northwestern Virginia under General Robert E. Lee, whom he would describe as a kind, courtly, and charismatic man: "I fell in love with the old gentleman," said Watkins, after speaking with him, "and felt like going home with him" (W, 18—19).

As we witness by the narrative of "*Co. Aytch*," Watkins would fight through some of the most difficult battles of the Civil War. Service at Shiloh was followed by the Corinth, Perryville, Murfreesboro, Shelbyville, Chattanooga, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, the Hundred Days Battles, Atlanta, Jonesboro, Franklin, and Nashville campaigns. He was wounded three times at Murfreesboro, Atlanta, and Nashville but always recovered to reenter the fray. Out of the original 1,250 men who formed the Army of Tennessee, and the 1,950 recruits and conscripts who joined them, only 65 officers and men remained when the war was concluded in 1865. Out of the 120 men who enlisted with Watkins in Company H in 1861, he was one of only seven survivors.

It was during the lull following the bloody battle at Murfreesboro that young Watkins took French leave for three days to visit his fiancée, Virginia Jane Mayes, in Columbia. He escaped court-martial with only a forfeiture of four months pay. He retumed to marry her on September 5, 1865, and settled down to married life, a succession of eight children, and divided his time between farming and running a general store. In April of 1881, he began to devote his evenings and early mornings to writing, and before his death on July 20, 1901, at the age of 62, Watkins had written or published in addition to "*Co. Aytch*" a quantity of articles for magazines and newspapers about his Civil War experiences. He seemed possessed by a keen desire to tell about the war from the ground up, as it appeared to a man who lived, fought, and survived one of the worst conflicts in human history.

The entire book is given a literary framework from the start. Watkins begins the narrative with what amounts to a fable about the war which posits both the absurdity of it and his own balanced view of the outcome. He tells of a time when one William L. Yancy began to promote the "strange and peculiar notion that the sun rose in the east and set in the west, and that the compass pointed north and south." Many people who believed that "the United States of America had no north, no south, no east, no west" argued against this notion, including the Puritans, "Horrors" Greely, and Charles Sumner, and soon all the people were "fighting and gouging" over the argument. The two sides elected Jeff Davis and Abe Lincoln captains and fell to fighting. "Abe's side got the best of the argument," and now "the sun rises over the hills and sets over the mountains, the compass just points up and down, and we can laugh now at the absurd notion of there being a north and a south." Instead, now "we are one and undivided" (W, 8—10). The irony of the conclusion is clear—Watkins believes that it will take more than a war to eradicate regionalism in the United States —, but by reducing the conflict to a neighborhood scrap, he also undercuts any justification for the thousands of lives lost in the struggle. He appears to side too with those who argued that the war was basically a conflict between two economic systems, one agricultural and the other industrial, over the fate of the nation. That he was fighting to preserve slavery never seems to have crossed his mind.

The second framing device is to envision the war as a circus. The title page calls his account "A Side Show to the Big Show," an image that is returned to in the conclusion: "The curtain is rung down, the foot-lights are put out, the audience has all left and gone home, the seats are vacant, and the cold walls are silent" (W, 233). Thus the pomp and circumstance of battle, the posturings and assertions of patriotism amount to no more than the antics of the clown and the tumblings of the acrobat in a stage show at the circus. Both the opening fable and this sustained metaphor work effectively to establish an attitude and point of view for both the narrator and the reader.

At the time Watkins was writing in 1881, American literature was moving largely under the influence of realism. While such writers as William Dean Howells and Henry James felt the writer should devote himself to describing the tasteful and the beautiful in the world of daily life, others such as Ambrose Bierce, Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, Kate Chopin, and Frank Norris moved the focus directly on the tragic aspects of life and painted a sometimes horrifying view of man fighting a hostile, mechanical world of injustice and sudden death. In attempting to describe his experiences in what he called an "unholy and uncalled for war" (W, 94), Watkins instinctively adopted the methods of realism and spared the reader nothing in describing the horror and brutality of the battlefield.

It is interesting to compare the way Bierce and Watkins describe one of the same engagements at which both were witnesses, the bloody battle of Chickamauga. Bierce's story "Chickamauga," written around 1889, over 25 years after the event, adopts the strategy of limiting the point of view to that of a six-year-old deaf and mute child who has wandered onto the battlefield by mistake, before moving to a larger adult perspective to render ironic judgement on the carnage. The child mistakes wounded soldiers dragging themselves to a creek for water as bear-like but gentle creatures with which he can play:

> He now approached one of these crawling figures from behind and with an agile movement mounted it astride. The man sank upon his breast, recovered, flung the small boy fiercely to the ground as an unbroken colt might have done, then turned upon him a face that lacked a lower jaw—from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone.[6]

In his chapter on Chickamauga, Watkins includes a strikingly similar image in describing the aftermath of battle as he walks across the field of slaughter:

---

[6] *The Collected Writings of Ambrose Bierce* (New York: Citadel Press, 1946) 21.

> Men were laying where they fell, shot in every conceivable part of the body. Some with their entrails torn out and still hanging to them and piled upon the ground beside them, and they still alive. Some with their underjaw torn off, and hanging by a fragment of skin to their cheeks, with their tongues lolling from their mouths, and they trying to talk (W, 97).

The difference here, of course, is that Bierce has couched his scene of horror within the comfortable context of a piece of fiction, even though the rude juxtaposition of a young child witnessing this offers its own unsettling contrast. Watkins gives us his view exactly as he witnessed it, and we are both repelled and attracted by the sight as we are by a photograph of a mutilation from which we are unable to divert our eyes. Bierce, of course, witnessed Chickamauga from the position of a topographical officer on the sidelines, while Watkins was there on the field participating in the bloodshed. For those who know this, it lends an element of authenticity to Watkins, but in any case, his passage is at least equally compelling and powerful. It could be argued too that Bierce's use of a child is rather contrived and appeals too strongly to the sentimental side of the reader, while Watkins resorts to no easy emotion other than unadulterated horror.

The great American fictional classic of the Civil War is, of course, *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane, written in 1893 and published in 1895 and based only on extensive reading in books about the war. There are so many parallels between "*Co. Aytch*" and *The Red Badge* that I suspect Watkins's book must have been among those read by the young author born six years after the war was over. I will suggest only a few.

Like the fictional Henry Fleming in Crane's novel, Sam Watkins as yet unitiated in battle also feels envy for those who have encountered "war, the blood swollen god"[7] and wear their wounds proudly:

---

[7] Stephen Crane, *The Red Budge of Couruge,* hereafter abbreviated *as RB,* Crane, *Prose and Poetry* (New York: Library of America, 1984) 103.

> Ah, how we envied those that were wounded. We thought at that time that we would have given a thousand dollars to have been in the battle, and to have had our arm shot off, so we could have retumed home with an empty sleeve (W, 16).

Crane offers the same idea more succinctly:

> At times he regarded the wounded soldiers in an envious way. He conceived persons with torn bodies to be peculiarly happy. He wished that he, too, had a wound, a red badge of courage (RB, 133).

Except for the final felicitous image that gave the book its title, Watkins's style is as simple and as direct as that of Crane.

One of the most famous and often-explicated images in Crane's novel is the final line of chapter nine: "The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer" (RB, 137). Watkins also had his own red sun as a silent witness to the ravages of man: "The sun was poised above us, a great red ball, sinking slowly in the west, yet the scene of battle and carnage continued" (W, 54).

The most frequently discussed figure *in The Red Badge* is the tall soldier, Jim Concklin, who lurches through chapter nine in a coma-like state, incoherently conversing with Henry, finally to collapse into a death tremor. Henry reports, "As the flap of the blue jacket fell away from the body, he could see that the side looked as if it had been chewed by wolves" (RB, 137). Watkins has a very similar experience with an equally spectral figure at Murfreesboro:

> As I went back to the field hospital, I overtook another man walking along. I do not know to what regiment he belonged, but. I remember of first noticing that his left arm was entirely gone. His face was as white as a sheet. The breast and sleeve of his coat had been torn away, and I could see the frazzled end of his shirt sleeve, which appeared to be sucked into the wound. I looked at it pretty close, and I said "Great God!" for I could see his heart throb, and the respiration of his lungs. I was filled with wonder and horror at the sight. He was walking

along, when all at once he dropped down and died without a struggle or a groan (W, 68—69).

Finally, Watkins frequently reflects on the tranquillity of nature which serves as a reminder of continuity in the scheme of things and the futile efforts of man to wreak havoc on the world, as in his final paragraph:

> The tale is told. The world moves on, the sun shines as brightly as before, the flowers bloom as beautifully, the birds sing their carols as sweetly, the trees nod and bow their leafy tops as if slumbering in the breeze, ... and the scene melts and gradually disappears forever (W, 336).

Crane is a bit more explicit:

> As he gazed around him the youth felt a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleamings on the trees and the fields. It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment (RB, 116).

And like Watkins, Crane's final line rests with nature: "Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds" (RB, 212).

These and additional parallels do suggest that *"Co. Aytch"* may have served as a source or is at least an analogue for Crane's novel, but I do not mean to suggest that Watkins is Crane's equal as a writer. Crane's wonderfully concise, poetically vivid, and psychologically accurate prose is one of the treasures of American literature. It is interesting to note that in these examples, as in others, both resorted to similar images and ideas, and Watkins has his own power deriving from an ability to describe his actual experiences without the adornment and romantic distancing characteristic of most commentators on the Civil War. Both give us an unadorned realism in prose, but one writes history and the other fiction.

Watkins also provides us with scenes and events which, as far as I know, have no parallels in the fiction of his time. For example, there is

the macabre story of the Rebel deserter and turncoat named Rowland who arrived at his place of execution to find his grave full of water and asked for a drink from it because "he had heard that water was very scarce in hell, and it would be the last he would ever drink" (W, 42). A more touching execution, and several are described in detail, is that of two Yankee spies who turn out to be young boys of sixteen and fourteen. When the younger begins to cry and plead for his life, "the older one kicked him and told him to stand up and show the Rebels how a Union man could die for his country." As they dangled from the ropes, Watkins noted, "I turned off sick at heart" (W, 83). Such stories could easily fit a fictional context, except Watkins tells us they actually happened.

Perhaps the most engaging element in Watkins's book is his sense of humor and irony which becomes evident whether he is talking about a louse race among the gambling soldiers, eating rats in hungry desperation, jeering a deserting officer, or ridiculing a chaplain who exorts the men to die and "sup to-night in Paradise" but runs when the bombs begin to fall as the soldiers shout, "The parson isn't hungry, and never eats supper" (W, 91). He could also capture with a gentle sense of comic self-deprecation one of his own social *faux pas* at the dinner table of a Chattanooga family with two handsome daughters in attendance. The food is abundant and good, but then the mother tells a daughter to pass the butter to Watkins, which he refuses because his plate is full:

> Now, there is nothing that will offend a lady so quick as to refuse to take butter when handed to you. ... If you don't eat butter, it is an insult; if you eat too much, she will make your ears burn after you have left. It is a regulator of society; it is a civilizer; it is a luxury and a delicacy that must be touched and handled with care and courtesy on all occasions. Should you desire to get on the good side of a lady, just give a broad, sweeping, slathering compliment to her butter. It beats kissing the dirty-faced baby; it beats anything. Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the butter, be it good, bad, or

> indifferent to your notions of things, but to her, her butter is always good, superior, excellent. I did not know this characteristic of the human female at the time, or I would have taken a delicate slice of butter.
>
> Here is a sample of the colloquy that followed: "Mister, have some butter?" "Not any at present, thank you, madam." "Well, I insist upon it; our butter is nice." "O, I know it's nice, but my plate is full, thank you." "Well, take some anyhow." One of the girls spoke up and said: "Mother, the gentleman don't wish butter." "Well, I want him to know that our butter is clean, anyhow." "Well, madam, if you insist upon it, there is nothing that I love so well as warm biscuit and butter. I'll thank you for the butter." I dive in. I go in a little too heavy. The old lady hints in a delicate way that they sold butter. I dive in heavier. That cake of butter was melting like snow in a red hot furnace. The old lady says, "We sell butter to the soldiers at a mighty good price." I dive in afresh. She says, "I get a dollar a pound for that butter," and I remark with a good deal of nonchalance, "Well, madam, it is worth it," and I dive in again. I did not marry one of the girls (W, 87—88).

Such a passage is an excellent example of how effectively Watkins handles dialogue, characterization, and humor to dramatic effect.

Watkins repeats over and over again in the course of his book, "Please remember, patient reader, that I write entirely from memory. I have no data or diary or anything to go by, and memory is a peculiar faculty" (W, 50). Readers who want descriptions of the battles from the larger perspective of leaders and officers should look elsewhere: "I know nothing of history. See the histories for grand movements and military maneuvers. I can only tell what I saw and how I felt" (W, 201), and he adds, "I only write of the under *strata* of history; in other words, the *privates'* history—as I saw things then, and remember them now" (W, 229). But as Roy P. Basler has observed, whatever his failures to remember names and dates, "his historical perspective was sounder

than that of many more important but far less intelligent men who occupied posts of high responsibility in the years 1861—1865."[8] As for the events themselves, Watkins affirmed, "every word of this is true... everything in this book" (W, 156).

The British historian Herbert Butterfield suggested in his essay on the "historical novel" that "history cannot come so near to human hearts and human passions as a good novel can; its very fidelity to facts makes it not perhaps less true to life, but farther away from the heart of things."[9] Watkins's piece of personal history then moves towards fiction in its reflections on "human hearts and human passions" in conflict and takes us to the heart of the absurd experience of war. Effective fiction, however, according to Butterfield, also possesses a historical sensibility:

> It is when the reader can feel that the things that are being related actually took place, and that the man about whom the stories are being told really lived although the stories about him may not all be true; it is when the thread of incident in the novel, as well as what might be called the texture of the book, can in some way be called "historical," that the work is most effective in its grip on actuality.[10]

"Co. Aytch" clearly has, then, the narrrative power of fiction about which Butterfield speaks, and we come to know and believe in Sam Watkins as a real person, not because he was, but because of the dramatic appeal of his literary ability as a writer.

In answer to the question, "Why do we read fiction?" Robert Penn Warren once wrote:

> The answer is simple. We read it because we like it. And we like it because fiction, as an image of life, stimulates and

---

[8] Basler, "Introduction," 9.

[9] Herbert Butterfield, *The Hisrorical Novel: An* Essay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924) 18.

[10] Butterfield, *The Historical Novel,* 52.

> gratifies our interest in life. But whatever interest may be appealed to by fiction, the special and immediate interest that takes us to fiction is always our interest in a story. A story is not merely an image of life, but life in motion—specifically, the presentation of individual characters moving through their particular experiences to some end that we may accept as meaningful. And the experience that is characteristically presented in a story is that of facing a problem, a conflict. To put it bluntly: no conflict, no story.[11]

Viewed from this perspective, *"Co. Aytch"* has all the appeal of fiction. Sam Watkins is a character moving through a meaningful action within the greatest possible conflict in American history—one that spelled the fate of the nation.

A work like *"Co. Aytch"* compels us to reconsider the artificial boundaries between history and fiction. This is a work that hews to the truth of an individual experience as humanly as possible and provides a realistic portrayal of human nature at its most noble and despicable. It is a primary historical document of the first order: balanced, objective, and truthful. Because of his skills as a writer—a realist, a humorist, and a stylist of unusual ability—Sam Watkins's book has the appeal of fiction and engages our interest as effectively and fully as does any well-crafted story or novel. His book deserves to be read alongside other fictional accounts of the Civil War because of the authenticity of the experience it portrays and the talent it reflects. In this case the fictionality of fact matches the factuality of fiction.

---

[11] Roben Penn Warren, "Why Do We Read Fiction?" Warren, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random, 1989) 55—66 (quotation on p. 55).